

Testimony of Jason Dinsmore
On behalf of the LWCF Coalition
In Support of the Land and Water Conservation Fund
House Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
The Honorable Betty McCollum, Chair
The Honorable David Joyce, Ranking Member
February 26, 2019

Madam Chair, Ranking Member Joyce, and Honorable Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) in the FY 2020 Interior Appropriations Bill. My name is Jason Dinsmore and I am a resident of Rochester, Minnesota. I serve as the Executive Director (interim) for the Minnesota Conservation Federation as Director of Conservation Partnerships for the National Wildlife Federation. My wife and I also own and operate K-M Regional Veterinary Hospital in Kasson, MN.

For the last 15 years, I've had the good fortune to combine my passion for the outdoors with a career in natural resources management and policy. A city kid by birth and growing up in Metro Detroit, my earliest memories are on the back of my mother's bike as she pedaled us through a local park. Weekends and any time available after school was spent "adventuring" through any greenspace I could find. As soon as I was old enough to keep up, my adventures graduated to the deer woods and the pheasant fields, chasing behind my father and grandfather. These early memories instilled in me a great wonder of the natural world and an even greater desire to protect it for future generations to enjoy. With two boys of my own, that desire is redoubled, wanting to make certain that the experiences afforded me through the availability of public land and recreational opportunities in my youth are accessible to them and their children as well.

I'm excited to be appearing today on behalf of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Coalition because, as an avid outdoorsman, I know the value of public land. This Coalition represents a wide variety of groups and individuals across the country who value land conservation and outdoor recreation with members from ranging from business leaders to sportsmen to conservation organizations. LWCF funding has permitted vital acquisitions and improvements in areas very important to me.

Outdoor recreation in Minnesota for me is about hunting and fishing, about traditions passed down through families. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and the Superior National Forest have become our "Up North". The Boundary Waters' alone features more than 1,200 miles of canoe routes, hundreds of miles of hiking trails and 2,000 campsites, made possible in part by at least \$14.4 million in LWCF investment to increase access and protect key inholdings. At least another \$4 million from LWCF has benefitted Superior National Forest. My children have grown up learning how to swim and fish in pristine Canadian border lakes, hearing wolves howl while sitting around a campfire, and have begun to connect to the great-out-doors in ways reminiscent

of my own beginnings. They've caught the same bug I did at their age and they're hooked. Hooked on the outdoors; on hunting, hiking, fishing, camping, boating, learning, and protecting. On becoming the next generation of stewards and conservationists.

Traditions are important, but outdoor recreation is also a significant economic engine for our state, supporting 140,000 direct jobs in Minnesota. It generates \$4.5 billion in wages and salaries, \$16.7 billion in retail sales and services, and brings in \$1.4 billion in tax revenue every year.

Most Minnesotans don't realize how much their outdoor fun depends on private land. As time goes on, access to these valuable properties can be lost. U.S. Forest Service studies predict that we will lose 44 million acres of private forest nationwide to development by 2030 as land is subdivided and resold. Large corporate landowners can change access policies without warning.

Although rivers themselves are public, the land around them is not. If you can't launch legally, you can't use the river. But this problem is not unique to anglers and paddlers. The biggest reason hunters stop hunting and hikers stop hiking is because private property has been put off limits. So I appreciate the opportunity today to advocate for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, America's premier federal program to ensure that we all have access to the outdoors. Whether it is a local community park or playground, or the vast expanses of our federal public lands, Congress created the LWCF over a half-century ago to guarantee America's natural, historical and outdoor recreation heritage. Even further, Congress had the wisdom to authorize an income stream of \$900 million annually for LWCF from offshore oil and gas leasing revenues – not taxpayers' dollars— to support this vital work. With an average of over \$6 billion coming in from offshore leasing royalties annually, \$900 million for the LWCF account is a reasonable conservation offset to offshore energy development. It only makes sense as we draw down some natural resources, that we reinvest a portion of the proceeds to conserve other natural resources. I've watched with dismay as, year after year, Congress has taken money from this fund to support other projects. This represents a broken promise to all Americans who expected this agreement to be honored.

LWCF is a time-tested program with remarkable range, reaching all Americans. Each of us has likely visited a park, trail or fishing access site that has benefitted from it. In total, more than 42,000 LWCF state assistance grants have added value to every state and 98 percent of the counties across the country. With kids spending less and less time outdoors and an obesity crisis threatening our public health, these investments are vital to urban, suburban, and rural communities alike. Each year, millions of Americans as well as international tourists visit our national parks and forests, hunt, fish or bird watch at our national wildlife refuges, or hike along our national trails. Yet, few are aware of the added protection that the LWCF program provides to our public lands. From Gettysburg to Yosemite, and countless places in between, LWCF funding has protected our natural, cultural, historical and recreation legacy, preserving our uniquely American landscapes, stories and traditions.

This program is versatile. In addition to land purchases at the local, state and federal level, LWCF also buys land and conservation easements to protect threatened waterfowl, trout and game habitat across the country. The Forest Legacy Program, funded by LWCF since 2004, has partnered with private landowners to protect over 2.6 million acres of working forests in 53 states, including \$16 million invested in Minnesota. The grim reality is that many forest properties are worth more as second-home lots or subdivisions than as working forests. Easements are designed to compensate private landowners who provide public access so that they can hold on to their property. Purchasing the development rights in places like the Koochiching-Washington Legacy Project frees owners from the unpredictable pressures of future development. They can focus instead on long-term forest management while continuing to pay property taxes, produce logs for local mills and preserve private sector jobs for rural communities.

Continued strategic LWCF investments in inholdings and conservation easements protects the asset that is our public lands, preventing incompatible development and enhancing access to outdoor recreation opportunities. Voyageurs National Park has benefitted from nearly \$54M in LWCF investment, and continues to identify critical acquisition needs. At the time of its completion, the spectacular Koochiching-Washington Forest Legacy Project was the largest conservation project in Minnesota for at least a decade. By leveraging funding made available by the LWCF, the project preserved more than 51,000 acres of forest habitat and will provide recreational access to 13 lakes totaling nearly 47 miles of shoreline. The public/private partnerships and the purchase of conservation easements made available by the LWCF are an invaluable tool for states as they seek to provide public access to growing populations of recreational users while also providing a sustainable source of revenue (timber harvests) to industrial landowners.

Increasingly, LWCF funding is playing an important role in landscape scale protection. This doesn't involve extensive federal purchases of land. Rather, open space, clean water and wildlife habitat can often be preserved by partnering with private landowners to sustain working landscapes and keep land on the tax rolls. Conservation easements purchases allow ranchers and farmers to remain responsible land stewards, as they have for generations. Today, LWCF funding is needed to protect working lands from the Everglades Headwaters to the Dakota Grasslands to the Rocky Mountain Front. These projects – stunning in scale and impact to local communities and traditional landscapes – are relatively small and strategic in terms of federal investment.

LWCF funding also attracts significant state, local and private contributions. The LWCF state assistance program has supported state and community park acquisition and development across Minnesota, from state parks to trails to recreation facilities like swimming pools, ballfields and hockey rinks, from city parks to lake access, beaches and boat landings. These are collaborative efforts that bring communities together to match the federal funds.

If we are serious about creating and sustaining homegrown jobs and ensuring our long-term economic recovery is equitable, benefitting small businesses and diverse communities, conservation spending on LWCF is not only a wise, but an essential

investment. Today, outdoor recreation and tourism represent a major part of the U.S. economy, one that America still dominates globally, and one that represents opportunities for sustained economic growth in rural and urban communities across America. According to the Outdoor Industry Association, outdoor recreation supports 7.6 million jobs and \$887 billion in consumer spending (Americans spend more only on health care and financial services). The popularity and demand for opportunities to recreate on public lands will only increase as our population grows and these natural places increase in aesthetic and economic value.

LWCF purchases and conservation easements also protect our threatened waterfowl, trout and big-game habitat as well as access to favorite hunting grounds, trout streams, rivers, and trails. Minnesota's National Wildlife Refuges have greatly benefitted from LWCF funding, including Minnesota Valley, Upper Mississippi River, Northern Tallgrass Prairie, and Crane Meadows; in addition to the St. Croix and Lower St. Croix National Scenic Rivers.

Madam Chair and members of the Subcommittee, I join with the LWCF Coalition and many others across the nation in urging you to support funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. This Administration's budget request has proposed utterly gutting this program for the last two years running, despite the fact that agencies—at the request of Congressional appropriators—continue to identify high-priority, now-or-never, willing seller projects across our national parks, wildlife refuges, forests and other public land. This program is incredibly oversubscribed, with projects often waiting several years to compete for funds. Congress has wisely rejected the Administration's unreasonable and damaging approach, keeping funding flat or providing small increases regardless of the party in power. This has included both federal agency priority projects and LWCF state grants including local parks and trails, and in non-federal protection of working forests, key wildlife habitat, and other irreplaceable outdoor resources. It has further included LWCF investments in landscape conservation, hunting and fishing access, civil war heritage sites, and national trails. These are priorities I think we can all agree upon.

Although I understand the financial constraints facing our nation today I also believe that we can't afford to lose the conservation opportunities that LWCF addresses, or the activity it injects into the economy. I therefore respectfully ask that you support the LWCF Coalition's FY 2020 recommendation of \$600 million for LWCF program. At two-thirds of the program's authorized funding level it represents a careful investment that spreads our limited resources wisely across urgent and diverse priorities. It also makes real progress toward the goal of fully funding this critical program.

In closing, I thank each of you for your dedication and service. There are few things that have greater lasting value to our citizens than protection of irreplaceable open space and natural landscapes. Long after the political battles of today are forgotten our public lands will nurture future generations of Americans. Let's make it happen!

Jason C. Dinsmore, JD